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THE NEW YORK TIMES
27 October 1979

Carter Gives Byrd Vow on MX and Cruise Missiles

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 26 — In promising to proceed with the MX missile and with cruise missiles suitable for use in Europe, President Carter has made clear to Senator Robert C. Byrd that he means full-scale deployment of the weapons.

The President told the Senate majority leader in a letter that "I cannot envisage any circumstances" in which the decision would be changed. Senator Byrd made public, in an interview today, the text of Mr. Carter's letter and commented: "You can't make it clearer than that."

Indeed, the wording chosen by the President could be read to foreclose — or nearly so — any possibility that the still-unbuilt MX mobile intercontinental missile could be traded away for a concession by the Soviet Union in future negotiations on another nuclear arms treaty.

For foreign policy and budget reasons, Mr. Carter's pledge to the West Virginia Senator is likely to be unpopular with some liberal senators who are still unreconciled to the President's decision in June to begin development of the MX system.

Reassurance to Some Senators

On the other hand, the promise may reassure other senators who have expressed fear that the White House would be tempted to prolong the period of validity of a protocol to the strategic arms treaty, now pending in the Senate, that forbids until Dec. 31, 1981, the deployment of mobile missiles and of ground-launched or sea-fired cruise missiles.

In the interview, Senator Byrd also strongly hinted that he favored increases in military spending larger than the 3 percent real growth that President Carter had promised but beyond which he has been reluctant to go.

Yesterday, Senator Byrd endorsed the arms treaty at a news conference and he mentioned the existence of the President's written assurance. Today, the Senator said he called on the President at the White House a week ago and received a letter from Mr. Carter Monday, dated that day. The key paragraph said:

"It is my firm intention to proceed with the testing, development, and deployment of the recently approved sheltered ground-mobile MX-basing system, and with currently programmed cruise missile deployments. Both are needed for our defense, and I cannot envisage any circumstances under which there would be any de facto extension of the Protocol

which could interfere with our firm intention to deploy these systems."

Mr. Carter also wrote that he was "prepared to assure" that no category of cruise missile or the MX "will be delayed or inhibited" by the treaty protocol.

MX Deployment Starts in 1986

According to present plans, the United States would build 200 MX missiles, each with 10 independently targetable nuclear warheads, and begin deploying them in 1986. All would be operational by 1989. To avoid destruction in a possible first strike by the Soviet Union, each missile would be mounted on a mobile launcher that could move on a "racetrack" course between scattered shelters.

During hearings on the strategic arms treaty, high officials of the Administration said they would consider halting development and deployment of the MX only in the event the Soviet Union made a major reduction in its arsenal of missiles and thus reduced the vulnerability of fixed-site land missiles to destruction.

The present treaty permits the United States to proceed with developing and deploying air-launched cruise missiles, or unmanned winged weapons carried by bombers to the launching points.

Plans for Cruise Missiles

Although the present treaty prohibits actual deployment of long-range cruise missiles until 1982, the present United States five-year defense plan contains programs for deployment of both air-launched and ground-launched missiles of that type. For a number of reasons, partly political and partly technical, there is no "current" firm program for sea-launched cruise missiles.

But one authority on defense matters said that, for practical purposes, "the President's letter seems to be a firm commitment" to seek to deploy ground-based cruise missiles in Europe.

Such a step will require permission of the NATO allies, and the Administration is seeking such agreement.

Senator Mark O. Hatfield, Republican of Oregon, is one of several Senate liberals who have warned they may vote against the strategic arms treaty if the "price" of its ratification is an increase in military spending and deployment of such powerful and what they feel are potentially "destabilizing" weapons as MX. The President's letter, Senator Hatfield said today, "makes SALT II all the more of an illusion and heightens my concern about the SALT process."